

*Struggle for Mastery: Disfranchisement in the South, 1888–1908.* By Michael Perman (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2001) 395 pp. \$49.95 cloth \$24.95 paper

In substance and methodology, this book represents a retreat to an earlier era. Perman refuses to state his or others' hypotheses clearly, or he qualifies them out of existence, repeatedly contradicts himself, arranges information to avoid confronting inconvenient facts, eschews quantitative or explicit qualitative tests, and undermines generalizations by exaggerating small differences and glossing over large ones.

Instead of asking new questions or offering new answers to previously posed questions about disfranchisement and its effect on southern politics, Perman evades and equivocates. Was suffrage restriction in the South the result of a sequential process, involving violence and fraud, which reduced black and lower-class white political power enough to allow state legislative and eventually constitutional action? Even though this thesis was enunciated in the 1970s and refined in published works in the 1980s and 1990s, Perman does not recognize it.<sup>1</sup> Instead, he draws a bright line between "manipulation" of anti-Democratic, particularly black, voters, and their later "elimination" at some points (5–6, 245, 322), and considerably blurs the boundary at others (48–69, 168, 281, 321).

Were discriminatory election laws necessary to counter real threats to white Democratic supremacy? By starting his study in 1888, after many of the initial and partial restrictive devices had been adopted, emphasizing the very last, constitutional restrictions, and avoiding systematic assessments of danger to the Democrats, Perman is able—artificially and unsatisfactorily—to represent the threat as a largely symbolic product of overactive racist imaginations (25–27, 33, 97, 173, 293). Even before disfranchisement, he declares, southern blacks had "no political power" (26), a judgment that overlooks considerable black office-holding and a degree of influence over white officials that was demonstrated by its stark diminution after African-Americans lost the vote in the South.

Were lower-status whites a secondary target of restrictive measures? Sometimes he says "yes" (185, 221, 295–96, 317) and sometimes, "no" (27–30, 84, 221, 316–19). Did Democratic disfranchisers have partisan, as well as racial, motives? Perman covers all the options: While acknowledging the partisan effects of restrictions (63–66, 281), and, sometimes, their partisan motives (7, 54–57, 141, 172, 233), at other times, he con-

1 Kousser, *The Shaping of Southern Politics: Suffrage Restriction and the Establishment of the One-Party South, 1880–1910* (New Haven, 1974), 243–244; *idem*, "The Undermining of the First Reconstruction: Lessons for the Second," in Chandler Davidson (ed.), *Minority Vote Dilution* (Washington, D.C., 1984), 30–31; *idem*, "The Voting Rights Act and the Two Reconstructions," in Bernard Grofman and Chandler Davidson (eds.), *Controversies in Minority Voting: The Voting Rights Act in Perspective* (Washington, D.C., 1992), 145.

siders partisan impacts unintentional (148) or even "not exactly unintended" (328). Were the most important leaders of disfranchisement upper-class men, usually from black-majority counties? Largely ignoring the class issue, Perman roils the pattern by characterizing some leaders as "farmers" (92), "reformers" (125, 174, 201, 273, 298, 326), or the "leadership structure" (149, 323), amorphous categories that overlap with upper status and black belt groupings.

Were the disfranchisement schemes similar across the states? Despite the fact that all eleven of the ex-Confederate states adopted poll taxes and either literacy tests or their statutory counterparts, secret ballot laws—which Perman concedes achieved the disfranchisers' goals "more than adequately" (314)—he separates the eleven states into five distinct groups, depending, for instance, on whether they adopted equally fraudulent "grandfather" or "understanding" clauses or whether they passed constitutional changes by referenda or constitutional conventions. Spot-lighting twigs, Perman obscures the forest.

Was there general agreement among disfranchisers and a chasm between them and their black and white critics? Piling up details of minor, if sometimes lengthy, squabbles in the constitutional conventions, all of which ended up with similar suffrage plans, Perman exaggerates conflict among Democratic leaders. Moreover, although he usually notes the massive fraud necessary to impose disfranchisement in referenda, he devotes much less attention to the considerable black and white resistance to disfranchisement than to its accomplishment.

Was the reshaped post-suffrage-restriction, southern political system new or a return to the pre-Civil War arrangement? For once unequivocally taking a position, Perman calls it a "restoration" (10, 328). But the antebellum system had vigorous party competition, not a non-party system; antebellum white males turned out at high, not low, rates; and antebellum blacks were non-citizens, not second-class citizens. It is Perman's book, not the transformed early twentieth-century political system, that returns to an earlier era—in the case of his book, one that is idiographic, pre-social scientific, and interpretatively empty.

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*Pullman Porters and the Rise of Protest Politics in Black America, 1925–1945.*  
By Beth Tompkins Bates (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2001) 275 pp. \$45.00 cloth \$17.95 paper

Despite the title of Bates' monograph, the sleeping-car porters employed by the legendary Pullman Company do not play a central role in her story. True, A. Philip Randolph, the charismatic socialist intellectual who became the leader of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP), is, necessarily, a pivotal player. In 1937, after more than a decade of struggle, Randolph succeeded in negotiating a collective-bargaining